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ABSTRACT

This digest describes the post-school outcomes of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in education, employment, and social relationships. It also presents several school-based strategies to improve the post-school outcomes for students with EBD, including: (1) social skills training that involves both direct instruction and teacher mediation; (2) peer mediation and conflict resolution; (3) positive behavioral support that includes problem solving school teams, implementation of prevention-focused, validated strategies based on team decisions, matching both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors with the contexts in which the behaviors occurred, and systematic reinforcement of and focus on appropriate behaviors within multiple school environments; (4) vocational training that provides special job training and experience through vocational work placements, job coaching, and other related activities; (5) transition planning that identifies community agencies that can assist in meeting financial needs, provides employment training from multiple work sites, and identifies counseling agencies to assist in addressing life-stresses; and (6) wrap-around planning that matches individual and family needs with community agencies and opportunities. (CR)

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Improving Post-School Outcomes for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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Individuals with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) experience the least favorable outcomes of any group of individuals with disabilities. Advocates for this population are concerned about the degree to which individuals with EBD are able to contribute positively to society given their challenging behaviors and the manner in which schools typically perceive and interact with them. This digest describes the post-school outcomes for students with EBD in education, employment, and social relationships. It also presents several school-based strategies to improve the post-school outcomes for students with EBD.

Students with EBD often display characteristics that do not support success in or out of school. They may not be able to maintain appropriate social relationships with others; they may have academic difficulties in multiple content areas; and they may display chronic behavior problems, including noncompliance, aggression, and disrespect toward authority figures.

These characteristics are exacerbated by the tendency of schools to place individuals with EBD in settings that are more restrictive than those of any other group of students with disabilities. On the other hand, research shows that placing these students in inclusive settings is not sufficient to increase either appropriate behavior or acceptance by peers. In addition, policies such as "zero tolerance," in which students are suspended or expelled from school because of certain behaviors, may place students with EBD outside of any educational setting and beyond the reach of educators who could help them address their difficulties.

The Current Situation

Educational Outcomes

Individuals with EBD characteristically have experienced academic difficulties during their school careers. For example, learning disabilities frequently co-exist with EBD and result in problems mastering academic content (Coleman & Vaughn, 2000). The connection between academic and social behaviors appears to be reciprocal, with failure in one precipitating failure in the other. These students also have fewer opportunities to experience success in school and fewer instructional interactions with their teachers. Consequently they receive less exposure to academic content.

As a result of their academic difficulties, many students with EBD do not finish high school. After age and parent income level, the best predictor that these students will drop out is a lack of competency with basic skills, including math and reading. In fact, research shows that more than 50% of students with EBD drop out (Chesapeake Institute, 1994).

Of the students who do graduate, relatively few complete, or even pursue, post-secondary education. Of a sample of individuals with EBD who left high schools in the state of Washington in 1985, researchers found that after ten years, only 28.6% had completed a post-secondary program, compared with 66.9% of students without disabilities (Malmgren, Edgar & Neel 1998).

Employment

Data from several longitudinal studies (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992; Malmgren et al., 1998) suggest that, in comparison to workers with no disabilities and those with other disabilities, workers with EBD experience longer delays in obtaining employment after graduation from school, lower percentages of employment after leaving school, and lower employment rates overall. Those who work may hold multiple, short-term jobs rather than a single job over time. In addition, individuals with EBD are more likely to be employed part-time rather than full-time and to earn less than individuals with or without other disabilities.

Social Relationships

Individuals with EBD have more problems in social adjustment than other groups of individuals with disabilities (Wagner et al., 1992). They may be unable to form relationships with people who will positively contribute to their successful independence or are in a position to provide personal, professional, and financial support (clergy, employers, counselors). If they have difficulties, or if the social networks don't exist, they are more likely to experience negative interactions within their communities. Individuals with EBD are also more likely to be arrested and/or incarcerated.

Improving Post-School Outcomes

Social Skills Training

Effective social skills instruction involves individual planning (Scott & Nelson, 1998). Social skills training is one of the most effective interventions for the most challenging behaviors, but only when it teaches specific behaviors to students based on their individual needs.

Effective social skills instruction typically involves both direct instruction and teacher mediation. Direct instruction identifies the specific social skills needing development and provides teacher-directed instruction and practice across natural settings. Teacher-mediated strategies rely on teacher-prompted interactive behavior that is reinforced for appropriate responses. The goals of such curricula include allowing the individual to initiate and develop positive social relationships, facilitating the individual's ability to effectively cope with behavioral expectations of daily living, and providing the basis for effective self-determination. Although logically a primary area for instruction for students with EBD, few formal social skills curricula exist in current educational programs for these students.

Peer Mediation and Conflict Resolution

In peer mediated strategies, a peer without disabilities is trained by an adult to interact effectively with a student with disabilities. Following training, the two students meet for pre-selected social activities and the trained peer models, reinforces, and prompts appropriate social responses and behavior from the target student.

Peer-mediated procedures remove the adult from the intervention, increasing the probability that the student will initiate interactions and not just respond to prompts, in an environment conducive to ongoing, age-appropriate interactions. Using peers allows positive behavior to

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be naturally rewarded, increasing the chances that positive behavior changes will last and be used in different situations.

Positive Behavioral Support

A new approach to intervention for students with EBD and those at risk for behavioral problems is Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) (Sugai et al., 2000). PBS is based on the premise that schools address the full range of behavioral issues and needs of the student population, including strategies for preventing challenging behavior and intervening when such behavior does occur. Interventions based on PBS also focus on teaching desired replacement behaviors that serve the same functions as undesired behavior. School-wide interventions are prerequisite to the success of more specific and individualized interventions and programs. Effective implementation of PBS strategies is based on the following:

- problem-solving school teams with built-in administrative support,
- implementation of prevention-focused, validated strategies (e.g., direct instruction and social skills instruction on expected appropriate school behaviors) based on team decisions,
- matching both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors with the contexts in which the behaviors occur, and
- systematic reinforcement of and focus on appropriate behaviors within multiple school environments.

Vocational Training

Another strategy employed to improve post-school outcomes for individuals with disabilities is vocational training. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act, passed in 1994, focuses on coordinated efforts between schools and the community to design and provide an appropriate, individualized education for individuals with disabilities, including those with EBD, that smoothly and successfully moves them from the school environment to the work environment. This act and other school efforts focus on providing students with EBD with the skills that employers seek. Thus, while still in school, individuals with EBD are provided with specific job training and experiences through vocational work placements, job coaching, and other related activities.

Transition Planning

According to P.L. 105-17, the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, schools must write and implement a transition plan for all students with disabilities who are 14 years old or older. A transition plan details the individual's and family's post-school goals specific to employment and independent living. Areas of focus typically include adult services, supported employment, independent living options, and post-secondary education. In addition, a transition plan focuses on the individual's present needs. For individuals with EBD, examples of goals and needs include:

- identifying community agencies that can assist in meeting one's financial needs,
- gaining employment training from multiple work sites to assist in the decision-making process regarding vocational choices after graduation, and
- identifying counseling agencies to assist in addressing the life-stresses the individual may experience.

Transition planning often includes self-advocacy and and how to set realistic personal and professional goals. For example, if one goal is to live independently in an apartment, then he or she will need to be taught to:

- identify living options in the community,
- secure employment to financially support the goal,
- budget for the cost of living by oneself, and
- identify individuals who can assist in difficult situations (e.g., rental disputes, requests for repairs).

Wrap-Around Planning

More and more individuals with EBD are receiving integrated services designed through wrap-around planning. In essence, wrap-around plans match individual and family needs with community agencies and opportunities. Services commonly used by individuals with EBD include counseling; financial counseling; job training, mentoring, and coaching; and health services (Karp, 1996). In providing integrated services to these persons before they complete school, it is important that appropriate community supports and contacts be in place to help the individual achieve post-school success. Current research efforts in the provision of wrap-around planning are validating the long-term benefits possible with this strategy for individuals with EBD.

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